

COLORS OF WAR

WELCOME TO OUR NEW DEPARTMENT HIGHLIGHTING COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY OF MILITARY AIRCRAFT FROM THE LATE 1930s THROUGH THE EARLY 1960s. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN PULLED FROM OUR EXTENSIVE PHOTO LIBRARY AND WILL SERVE TO DOCUMENT HISTORIC AIRCRAFT AND THEIR FINISHES

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY



With the invasion of France, aerial fighting intensified on both sides of the English Channel so it was no surprise that aircraft from opposing air forces started coming down in some numbers and were quickly snatched as war prizes. One such machine was Supermarine Spitfire Mk. IA N3277/AZ*H that was flown on 15 August 1940 by Pilot Officer Richard Hardy who engaged with Bf 109Es over the Channel off Swanage. The Spitfire, assigned to 234 Squadron at Leconfield, took a direct 20mm cannon hit behind the cockpit, causing extensive damage and shattering the canopy. The stricken Spitfire was quickly surrounded by Bf 109Es and the German pilots pointed to the ground — wanting him to land in France. Rather than risking a parachute jump over the Channel, Hardy dropped gear and flaps and landed in a farm field near Cherbourg where he was almost immediately captured. This was during the height of the Battle of Britain and getting an intact Spitfire was a major propaganda coup so the plane was extensively photographed. This view shows the damage to advantage as a German cross is painted over the British roundel.

In this view, the Spitfire is swarmed by curious German personnel. A temporary patch has been placed over the cannon damage and the *Luftwaffe* markings are complete, with the painter having left the "A" of the AZ*H code in place. The fighter had been pushed near the cover of some trees to give some camouflage against marauding RAF fighters that certainly would have strafed such a tempting target. After interrogation,

Hardy was shuffled off to various prisoner of war holding camps but by May 1941 he was apparently on the permanent staff at *Dulag Luft* (Transit Camp — Air) at Oberursel, near Frankfurt, which was a temporary holding camp for captured Allied airmen. On 1 June of that year, Hardy and 13 other British members of the camp's permanent staff escaped via a tunnel they had been digging. This resulted in an extensive search by over 3000 police and security personnel that resulted in the capture of all escapees. Hardy then spent some time at *Stalag Luft III* at Sagan and was only released at war's

end when the camp was captured by the Allies. He died in September 1997. Using parts from other shot-down Spitfires, N3277 was repaired and tested at Rechlin, carrying the code 5+2. It was also flown by pilots from a number of fighter units based in France.



When it first flew in 1935, the Bristol Blenheim was one of world's most modern aircraft. Originally developed as a private venture to create a high-speed civil airliner, the British Air Ministry was impressed with the aircraft's performance and requested Bristol to move forward with a military variant, the Type 142M, and deliveries to Royal Air Force squadrons began in March 1937. One of the first British aircraft built with all-metal stressed skin construction, it also featured retractable landing gear, flaps, powered gun turret, and variable pitch propellers. When the Second World War began during September 1939 with Germany's invasion of Poland, the RAF could field 13 squadrons of Blenheim Mk. Is with two of those squadrons based in the UK and the others at overseas bases. The upgraded Blenheim Mk. IV was replacing the Mk. I and 168 Mk. IVs were with the RAF at the outbreak of the war. However, by this point the Blenheim was woefully obsolete and no match for the aggressive *Luftwaffe*. When the Germans invaded France, the RAF Advanced Air Striking Force was deployed to numerous French

airfields for strikes on German targets. On 14 May 1940, a combined force of 71 Blenheims and Fairey Battles attacked advancing Germans and a stunning 40 aircraft were shot down by *flak* and Bf 109Es. From that point, even though Blenheim missions were protected by fighters the losses were high — averaging 25% and any Blenheim flight over occupied territory took on the aspect of a suicide mission. The enlisted crew of Blenheim Mk. IV Z7432/YH*J assigned to No. 21 Squadron ventured forth from RAF Watton to attack German targets in France on 4 July 1941. The bomber was hit by accurate German ground fire but managed to limp back to Watton for a successful crash landing minus the propeller for its left Bristol Mercury radial. As can be seen, the base fire crew doused the plane with suppressant foam. The photo shows the Mk. IV to be in near-new condition and camouflage buffs will note that the top colors are soft-sprayed (the edges blending into each other) while the bottom color has a hard line of demarcation. After useful parts were removed, the airframe was scrapped.